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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR CALLS ON THE SUPREME ELECTORAL TRIBUNAL

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reason 1.4 (B & d)

¶1. (U) Summary: The Ambassador paid a courtesy call on the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) who informed him that things were progressing positively and that they felt well prepared for the upcoming primary elections on November 16. The TSE magistrates detailed their plans for both international and domestic observers and the complicated system for counting the votes. The Ambassador said that democracy, and by extension, free and fair elections, was a top priority for the USG and pledged to continue our technical support through USAID. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) After completing his round of courtesy calls on members of the GOH, including all Ministers who were available, the Ambassador began reaching out to those institutions that are vital to our bilateral relationship. One of the first of these courtesy calls was on the three magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), which will oversee both the primary (November 16, 2008) and general (November 2009) elections. The Magistrates include Augusto Aguilar (Liberal Party), Jacobo Hernandez, (National Party) and Saul Escobar (Christian Democratic Party). The Ambassador reiterated to the magistrates that one of the USG's top priorities is to support democracy in Honduras, which means supporting a free, fair and transparent electoral process. He noted that the USG has historically been involved in directly supporting elections through technical assistance, which would continue through both the primaries and general elections. The President of the TSE, Augusto Aguilar, thanked the Ambassador for his visit and for continuing USG assistance. Aguilar then mentioned the extensive media speculation that the primaries could be postponed until February 2009 because of the weather situation. He informed us that only the Congress could authorize a postponement and that President of the Congress Roberto Micheletti had come out publicly against this proposition. Aguilar assured the Ambassador the TSE would also not support such a proposition.

Process Proceeding Smoothly

¶3. (SBU) The magistrates assured the Ambassador throughout the visit that the technical preparations for the primary process was going well and proceeding smoothly. Escobar told the Ambassador that the indelible ink that had been purchased from Mexico had already arrived, and that the rest of the equipment, which consisted of ballot boxes, private stations in which voters can mark their ballots, and suitcases in which the entire package will be sent to the 9,640 voting stations, had all been purchased in Mexico and was on its

way. The materials are all made of a durable plastic, so the magistrates said they fully expect to be able to use these items again for the general elections in 2009. The "electoral suitcases" will be sent to the voting stations, beginning with the ones in the most remote locations, beginning on November 8. By November 15, all stations will have their supplies.

Observers - International and Domestic

14. (SBU) Aguilar told the Ambassador that the Organization of American States, members of all the diplomatic missions resident in Honduras, and the members of the Tikal Agreement (which includes Central American, Panama and the Dominican Republic) have all been invited to participate as international observers for the primaries. Aguilar noted that eight representatives from the various political parties in Panama will be sending observers, as they are interested in possibly copying the Honduran primary system. Hernandez said that the TSE believes it is also vitally important to have domestic observers present during the process. He explained that the TSE accredits different organizations, who then hopefully choose impartial observers and train them. Aguilar noted that the TSE had just signed an agreement that would bring up to 70,000 teachers, whom he claims are fairly apolitical, into the process as domestic observers. And Hernandez noted that 500 - 800 students are being trained through a University umbrella organization to serve as observers. The goal stated by the magistrates is to have observers at each polling station, if possible.

Counting Process

15. (SBU) Hernandez explained that the polling stations would be open from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., but if a line remains outside the polling stations, the closing time can be extended for an additional hour to 5 p.m. By 6 p.m. the independent press can legally begin broadcasting news about the elections including any results. Escobar said that for the first time the TSE will instruct poll workers to leave the doors open after the polls close so that the observers (and the locals) can see the counting conducted in a transparent fashion, not behind closed doors. Each polling station will create a final count and record it on an official sheet ("acta"). Preliminary results for the presidential primaries will then be transmitted via phone and the official sheet in hard copy by the poll workers. Once received at the municipal level, Escobar explained there will be a "municipal commission" comprised of representatives of each of the movements, present and the various actas will be counted. The municipal level will then produce a summary of all the municipal actas, to be sent to the Departmental level. The Department will then create a Department-wide acta which will be sent to the TSE for the final tally. Aguilar explained that the law allows the TSE 30 days to finalize results, but predicted the official election results would be released within 10 - 15 days.

USG Support

16. (SBU) Aguilar asked if USAID would be involved in training domestic observers through the NGO Electoral Watchers (Mirador Electoral) as they were in the last elections. The Ambassador responded in the affirmative, but qualified his answer to say that our big push with Mirador Electoral would be for the general elections. At the end of the meeting, the Ambassador affirmed our support for the TSE and primary and electoral process, and stressed that the USG saw the TSE's role as key. He expressed our confidence in them, but also told them the "door was open" if they had problems or issues they would like to discuss.

Comment

17. (C) The TSE leaked news of the Ambassador's visit and called a huge mob of reporters to their offices to get the USG's view of the upcoming elections. The Ambassador responded to the press questions by explaining that this was

a courtesy call and that he had come to learn from the magistrates about preparations for the elections. The magistrates believe the Ambassador's presence lends them legitimacy and bolsters their image. They may have summoned the press because the Group of 16 (G-16) donors have publicly voiced increasing concern about the TSE's ability to manage all aspects of the election, especially the transmittal of preliminary results via cell phone and text message, and they wanted the Ambassador's positive message to counter this bad press. Despite the bumps in the road, however, most pundits agree that the elections will come together at the end and that the process will be free and fair. End Comment.

LLORENS